

Build or Buy? Smart Shopper's Guide

A quick reference for walking the HMPS26 exhibit hall with intent

"Smart Scaling: Build vs. Buy in 2026"

1. Your Build vs. Buy Snapshot

Before you commit to ANY new capability (internal or outsourced) check all four boxes. If you can't, start there.

- I know which capabilities are true differentiators for my team and my brand
- I know where we have talent gaps vs. bandwidth gaps (they require different solutions)
- I can articulate what "good partnership" looks like for my organization
- I know what a 12-month success metric looks like for any new vendor or new hire

2. The 3-Question Decision Filter

Run every build vs. buy decision through these three questions:

- Is this a true differentiator that you need long term?
- Do we realistically have (or can we acquire) the talent, capacity, and governance to do this well in 12–18 months?
- How reversible is this decision in 12-18 months (contracts, tech lock-in, and cultural change)?

If you can't confidently answer all three, spend a little more time thinking about it.

3. Questions to Ask Any Vendor

- What does implementation actually look like for a team our size and structure?
- Who owns the work: your team or ours? Where are the real handoffs?
- What does "AI-powered" actually mean in your product? What's automated vs. human-in-the-loop?
- How do you protect our brand voice and institutional knowledge?
- Can you connect us with 2–3 health system references of similar size and complexity?
- What does a recent client who left you say was the reason?
- What does success look like at 90 days? At 12 months? How do we measure it together?

4. Watch-outs

- They pitch a platform before understanding your workflow or your problem
- They can't explain ROI in your language (access, acquisition, brand, retention, etc.)
- No healthcare-specific references, or references only at much smaller scale
- The demo dazzles but they can't explain onboarding and change management
- They promise to do everything: generalists with a "yes to everything" posture
- Pricing is opaque or they can't explain how it's developed

5. Capability Categories — What Am I Shopping For?

Check the 2–3 categories you're actively evaluating. Use them to prioritize which exhibitors to visit.

- AI strategy, AI agents, and governance
- Analytics, measurement, and attribution
- Community management, reputation, and reviews
- Content strategy, production, and automation
- Creative, brand, and campaign development
- CRM / marketing automation / patient engagement platforms
- Digital advertising and paid media
- Market research, consumer insights, and social listening
- Web, SEO, and digital patient experience

6. Before You Leave the Hall

- Did I talk to at least one exhibitor in each of my priority categories?
- Did I ask the vendor *my* important questions, not just listen to the pitch?
- Do I have 3 concrete next steps (references to call, demos to schedule, proposals to request)?
- Do I know which decisions I'm bringing back to my team, and what data I still need?

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